

Redefining European Symbolism, c.1880-1910

Conference on the Nabis:

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*ABN Amro Bank Headquarters
(Courtesy of the Van Gogh Museum)*

Network Director: Professor Richard Thomson, *University of Edinburgh*

Network Facilitator: Craig Landt, *University of Edinburgh*

Speakers:

- Elizabeth Easton, *Center for Curatorial Leadership* (New York)
- Fred Leeman, *Amsterdam*
- Merel Van Tilburg, *University of Geneva*
- Gilles Genty, *Paris*
- Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Elizabeth Mix, *Butler University*, (Indianapolis)
- Katia Poletti, *Félix Vallotton Foundation*, (Lausanne)
- Katherine Kuenzli, *Wesleyan University*, (Middletown, Connecticut)

Attendees:

- Richard Thomson, *University of Edinburgh*
- Belinda Thomson, *University of Edinburgh*
- Frances Fowle, *University of Edinburgh/National Galleries of Scotland*
- Axel Rüger, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Chris Stolwijk, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Edwin Becker, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Nienke Bakker, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Evelien de Visser, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Maarten van 't Klooster, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Nikola Eltink, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Marieke Jooren, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Laura Prins, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Fransje Pansters, *Van Gogh Museum* (Amsterdam)
- Willem Russell, *Amsterdam*
- Josephina de Fouw, *University of Amsterdam*
- Ype Koupmans, *Open University*, (Amsterdam)

- Jelka Kröger, *Jewish Historical Museum*, Amsterdam
- Rob Van Vulpen, *Galerie Stylo*, (Amsterdam)
- Aukje Vergeest, *beeldvertaling.nl*, (Amsterdam)
- Jonieke van Es, *Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen*, (Rotterdam)
- Sjraar Van Heugten, *Utrecht*
- Claire Denis, *Mauricedenis.com* (Paris, Saint-Germain-en-Laye)
- Fabienne Stahl, *Mauricedenis.com* (Paris, Saint-Germain-en-Laye)
- Phillip Dennis Cate, *Bordeaux*
- Isabel Cate
- Riikka Stewen, *Academy of Fine Arts*, (Helsinki)
- Frédéric Bigo, *Musée départemental Maurice Denis*, (Paris, Saint-Germain-en-Laye)
- Marie El Caïdi, *Musée départemental Maurice Denis*, (Paris, Saint-Germain-en-Laye)
- Frédéric Miota, *Musée départemental Maurice Denis*, (Paris, Saint-Germain-en-Laye)
- Isabelle Cahn, *Musée d'Orsay*, (Paris)
- Sylvie Patry, *Musée d'Orsay*, (Paris)
- Caroline Boyle-Turner, *Pont-Aven School of Contemporary Art*, (Pont-Aven, France)
- Juliet Simpson, *Buckinghamshire New University*, (High Wycombe, UK)
- Clément Dessy, *Université Libre de Bruxelles*
- Julie Fäcker, *Université Libre de Bruxelles*
- Anita Hopmans, *Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie*, (The Hague)
- Mayken Jonkman, *Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie*, (The Hague)
- Liz Krein, *Stichting Kröller-Müller Museum*, (Otterlo)
- Michaela Gugeler, *Institut für Kunstgeschichte*, (Mainz)
- Kathy Lochnan, *Art Gallery of Ontario*
- Manuel Mayer,
- Lisa Smit
- Martin Sundberg, *University of Basel*
- Annika Sundberg,
- Caty Telfair, *University of California*, (Berkeley)
- Cindy Kang, *Institute of Fine Arts*, (New York University)
- Jason Vrooman, *Institute of Fine Arts*, (New York University)
- Christopher Drake, *London*

The first public conference of the Research Network entitled 'Redefining European Symbolism, c.1880-1910' took place in Amsterdam at the ABN Amro Bank. This was a collection of eight papers given to an audience of nearly 70. The conference topics centred on the Nabis group, and each paper was 30 minutes long with 15 minutes of discussion following. Below are the précis and abridged points of discussion.

As Principal Grant Holder, Richard Thomson (RT) opened the conference by welcoming all those who could attend and continued by outlining the objectives of the seminar and Network funded by the Leverhulme Trust. He warmly thanked Van Gogh Museum and ABN Amro Bank for hosting the conference.

The Secret World of Nabis Photography

Elizabeth Easton

Before the Kodak camera was introduced in 1888, photography was the domain of professionals. The advent of the Kodak—easily held in two hands and much more compact than the unwieldy tripod cameras it replaced—made photography accessible to the general public. At about that time, artists working in all media began using the camera as an intriguing toy, as a means of providing images to be used as studies for final works, and as another way of observing the world.

Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Félix Vallotton, and Edouard Vuillard, all members of the Nabis group, were well-known figures in the Parisian avant-garde of that time. Three other artists working in Europe during that period—George Hendrik Breitner, Henri Evenepoel, and Henri Rivière—responded to the camera with equal enthusiasm and in similar ways. While many painters used photography in one way or another around this time, these seven artists displayed common approaches and interests. All except for Rivière, whose primary medium was lithography, worked in oil on canvas. Photographs by Evenepoel evoke lithographs of Bonnard, nudes by Bonnard and Breitner capture the directness and awkwardness often concealed by their paintings, and Vuillard's dark, tightly knit interiors correspond to a similar moodiness in Breitner's compositions. Although several of them photographed together, snapped pictures of one another on group trips, and shared the results afterward, none of them ever exhibited a photograph.

Objective reproduction of reality would seem to be at odds with these artists' sensibility. Inspired by the work of Paul Gauguin, post-impressionist artists championed the imagination over observed reality. Maurice Denis wrote that the Nabis "realized that every work of art was a transposition, a caricature, the impassioned equivalent of a sensation experienced."¹ What's more, the rapid embrace of life seized in a photograph, while perhaps resembling the cropping and unexpected angles of a post-impressionist painting, nonetheless reflects a completely different execution.

Photography was more casual than painting, was limited to black and white, and lacked the texture of paint.² These artists tended to employ their cameras to record meaningful, often sentimental moments and events: a holiday trip, the birth of a baby, a special outing in the city. But beyond the merely anecdotal, the artists also used photography in ways that paralleled the compositional choices in their paintings and works on paper. The camera did not supplant the sketch but rather added a different dimension to a wealth of visual information that could be drawn upon. Sometimes, photographs were taken deliberately as study material for paintings. At other times the process was reversed, and a photograph recalled a painted composition from as much as a decade earlier. These seven artists exploited the ability of the Kodak to seize the moment and, simultaneously, allowed it to inform their art.

Notes

1. Maurice Denis, *Théories* (Paris: L. Rouart et J. Watlin, 1920), p. 167.
2. Meyer Schapiro, "Portraiture and Photography," *Impressionism: Reflections and Perceptions* (New York: Braziller, 1997), pp. 153–78.

Discussion

Dennis Cate: By the late 19th century pornographic images were readily available in photographs.

Elizabeth Easton: If pornographic images were so available then artists wouldn't have had to take their own. The George Hendrik Breitner photographs are very explicit and very similar to pornographic images of the time. Bonnard, on the other hand, used photographs of the nude exclusively for his commissions by Vollard. For Breitner, there were only a handful of nude sketches as such subjects don't figure in his painted work.

Katherine Kuenzli: Authorship: Who (Denis, Bonnard, Vuillard) is taking the images? Are they taken remotely? When taking holiday snaps it is quite common to hand the camera to someone else; how can one tell who the photographer was?

Elizabeth Easton: In the current exhibition (*Snapshot!*) there is a juxtaposition of a photo by Vuillard that resembles a painting by Vallotton. They travelled together; did they share pictures? It is difficult to decide who took what; perhaps this is a topic for the next generation to look at. For Denis, it may be easier as he is not in many photographs and he could have set the camera up and asked his wife to snap it.

Katia Poletti: In the Vallotton archives there are similar photographs to Vuillard's. We know from a letter between Vuillard and Vallotton that they were exchanging pictures. There are perhaps up to 10 photos where the author is unknown (Vallotton or Vuillard).

Caroline Boyle-Turner: Two Nabis names are absent, Paul Sérusier and Paul Ranson. Is there no evidence of photographs by these artists?

Elizabeth Easton: My theory is that everybody took photographs and it is only a matter of finding them. Those two were very creative and artistic people, so why wouldn't they embrace photography? In 1888 Kodak film could be purchased with 100 exposures, sent back to Kodak for processing and a new film inserted. By 1895, Kodak cameras had roll film and could be developed from the corner and printed. Everybody would have had a camera. It is probably just a matter of time before the right attic is searched or envelope opened.

Fred Leeman: There are many resemblances between photographs and paintings and could it be that just the set image was thrown away and the ones next in row preserved?

Elizabeth Easton: Are artists inclined to be so literal? If the *Snapshot!* show was only about photographs of paintings, it wouldn't be as interesting and also EE was very keen to include only photographs taken by artists. Other artists set up photo shoots and had others take photos, and it may be an idea to examine photo series to see that first image.

Emile Bernard and the Nabis; the Nabis and Emile Bernard.

Fred Leeman

In Denis' *Hommage à Cézanne*, the 'tableau de la troupe' of Vollard's artists, Émile Bernard is absent. The group portrait provides a last roll-call of the Nabis, tries to secure their art historical lineage and glorifies the dealer-critic system. He felt excluded, being 'le plus grand amateur de Cézanne' and supposed that his long absence in Cairo had made Denis forget him. Bernard's serious conception of his art historical mission as exemplified in the inscription on his 1901 self portrait had also developed in a direction, different from any Nabis. Nevertheless, he was eager to be exhibited with Vollard in 1901, where a retrospective of his work was to be seen that stressed his early development. Simultaneously, he sold 127 paintings to Vollard, again with a disproportionate amount of earlier work. Denis purported to like his work, but Bernard did not care, 'car je sais où je vais'. In 1902, he wanted to 'frapper un grand coup' at the Indépendants with his later work. Denis wrote to Séguin that Bernard 'fait définitivement du Benjamin Constant' as Gauguin had predicted. Léonce Bénédite's Salon des Orientalistes was an alternative venue. His large Egyptian canvasses in his 'manière sérieuse et grave' were risky from a commercial point of view, but Bernard succeeded to sell his *Fumeuse de Hashish* to the Direction des Beaux-Arts for the Luxembourg. Bénédite and Roger Marx became his supporters. Back in Cairo, fortified by his rising success and fearing marginalization of his role in the genesis of avant-garde painting, he wrote his 'Notes sur l'école dite de "Pont-Aven"', for the *Mercure de France* (December 1903). He tried to minimise the role of Gauguin by stating that his 'Pardon à Pont-Aven' had preceded Gauguin's *Vision* and tried to put a wedge between Gauguin and his followers by stating that Denis, Ranson, Bonnard and Roussel were already artistic personalities before they met Gauguin. Denis answered and pledged his veneration for Gauguin. Charles Morice pointed out that Bernard had exploited Gauguin's recent death... 'les Jeunes sont ici fort animé contre lui', Redon wrote.

The old brouille was revived by Bernard's article. Although he had been closely linked with the (later) Nabis from 1888 onwards – he introduced Sérusier to Gauguin in the autumn of 1888 - Bernard soon developed a different conception of art, based

on the intrinsic religious properties of 'primitive', medieval style. Bernard linked this with the idea of a 'Société des anonymes' that would abolish making art for personal glory and free artists of the ties of the art commerce. Gauguin had broken his promise and pursued his own objective, ingratiating himself with literary Symbolists and Denis refused because he felt the need to sell his work in order to make a living. Meanwhile, Bernard, Sérusier, Filiger participated at the first Salon de la Rose+Croix and in 1892 and 1893 Bernard and many of the Nabis were presented together by Le Barc de Boutteville. Denis wrote (as Pierre Louis) highly critical remarks in his compte-rendu of the 1892 Indépendants for the Revue Blanche, calling Bernard "l'intellectuel intolérant" and thus gave their difference of opinion a personal note. In 1893, in Florence, Bernard sought the company of Sérusier and Verkade and shared their admiration for Fra Angelico in Fiesole. In a letter to Bonger, written soon afterwards, Bernard held Filiger, Denis and Gauguin in high esteem as artists, but considered Redon 'le seul symboliste'. He rigorously separated them from Madame Jacquemin ("échappée de l'hôpital d'hystérie") and Séon, who should not be taken seriously as a 'maître'.

Still in Cairo, Bernard, sought his luck with Vollard at an early stage and asked Redon to push him in 1895. Mother Bernard warned him that Sérusier and Vuillard had visited her; Bernard considered them "envieux... sondeurs" and chastised their pretence by calling themselves 'prophets'. He thinks they ever more look the same. He admired Denis for the "grâce et amour" that he put in his works, although he made "choses sans force, pâlotés, féminines" every once in a while. He was "un artiste qui sait quelque chose ». Vuillard is "assez nul".

Because he felt being misrepresented by Camille Mauclair, Bernard wrote in February 1895 a 'Lettre ouverte' to him, published in the Mercure de France in June. He again stated that Gauguin had profited from his stylistic inventions. He considered his religious prints for L'Ymagier as a novelty that would soon be followed by Seguin, Denis and Sérusier.

By 1899, Bernard had developed his "manière grave et sérieuse" that separated him from the Nabis. He participated in the Salon d'Art Religieux of Brussels with a Saint Longin and Les Saints Pierre, Paul et Jean that contained life size figures, studied from life and deeply influenced by his experience of Zubaran in Sevilla. In the same year, the exhibition staged by Antoine de la Rochefoucauld at Durand-Ruel as an

'Hommage à Redon' that contained neo-impressionists as well as Nabis only contained Breton decorative work by Bernard from 1892-3. Bernard's absence from the Paris art scene had reduced him from to a controversial historical figure. Upon his return, he began a crusade against pernicious influences that threatened the great tradition of French art. Instead of painting seriously, the Nabis had exchanged their former ambition to commercialism by painting 'boîte à bonbons pour les snobs' (letter to Bonger, 12 May 1904). He visited and interviewed Cézanne in 1904 and in 1905 in order to show what he saw as the true merits of his venerated master. He also wanted to demonstrate that Cézanne had far from attained his goals and that his shortcomings were oddly seen as proofs of his originality by a younger generation. Henceforth, Bernard's painting can be seen as a continuous criticism of modernist painting, and, in a sense, as an attempt to complete and correct Cézanne. The technical rediscovery of Venetian painting techniques completely changed Bernard's style. This was appreciated by Verkade, with whom he met in Naples and Monte Cassino in 1905. Verkade wrote to Denis that he believed Bernard 'a le plus de technique de nous tous' and found Bernard had 'un talent robuste et puissant'. Only with Denis, who was perhaps his closest potential ally in a religious, a political and an artistic sense, time healed all wounds. They reconciled in 1916 and the well connected Denis helped Bernard to get his works exhibited in the twenties. From October 1940 onwards, Bernard tried to get a place in the Institut through Denis, and sought his cooperation in getting reforms in the education of the Académie des Beaux-Arts accepted by the Vichy régime. After Bernard's death on 26 April 1941, it was Maurice Denis who delivered the funeral oration.

Discussion

Richard Thomson: Around 1900, on Bernard's return from Egypt, did he have a sense that the Nabis were falling apart and that Denis's portrait group was an attempt to bring them together? After all, the Nabis identity was a little threatened at the end of the century.

Fred Leeman: Bernard saw a potential ally in Maurice Denis (they were close in their convictions) and had little patience for people like Vuillard and Bonnard. He believed they had betrayed the grand tradition of French painting, by only catering for the market and not taken challenging or critical positions.

Frances Fowle: Are there problems with dating Bernard's work?

Fred Leeman: Yes, as Bernard had to date a lot of pieces retrospectively (once sold) and was therefore accused of making up dates. He could never remember the exact date that he painted works. A lot of early work stayed in France undated and unsigned, so the situation is very complicated. The cleaning of a painting found 2 different dates!

Belinda Thomson: The row between Bernard and Gauguin (1890-1891) over the *Société des Anonymes*: did Bernard really believe that Gauguin could seriously subscribe to such an idea, when he had known Gauguin to be relieved to be selling through Theo van Gogh and desperately needing money?

Fred Leeman: Gauguin was always propagating the idea of *émigration en bloc*, selling the idea of travel to Madagascar and the Tropics as a group exercise. So he may have created the impression of wanting to be part of the group and establishing a studio with some pupils in the Tropics. For Bernard this was a harebrained idea. He confused the idea of remaining anonymous and acting as a group with the actions of Gauguin who made it apparent that they would always move as a group. It was Madeleine who had other grudges against Gauguin, who publicly accused Gauguin of leaving the others in the lurch, who labelled him a traitor). No indication that Gauguin would ever want to be part of the *Société des Anonymes*.

L'intérieur d'âme: projections of the unconscious in Fin de Siècle interiors by Vallotton and Vuillard.

Merel Van Tilburg

The conceptual conflation of the domestic interior and the notion of a subjective interiority – that is, the idea that the interior mirrors the inner self –furnished a new subject for nineteenth-century painting. A new artistic term was invented in the French language in 1883: “*intimiste*”. An intimist was first, a painter of interior views, but the meaning of the word quickly shifted to the artist who took as his subject “delicate sentiments”. The confusion of the domestic interior and human interiority is condensed in this new term. The term *intimist* also points out that the stage or site for the acting out of delicate or intimate sentiments, in the French society at the turn of the century, was the domestic interior.

My paper explored the development of this metaphorical transfer in two late nineteenth-century depictions of interiors by the Nabi painters Félix Vallotton and Edouard Vuillard, and included a short discussion of a the painting *Interior* (1868-1869) by Edgar Degas. With the discussion of these three artists, I hoped to provide an insight into different ways in which paintings of domestic interiors in the nineteenth century were informed by models of subjectivity and of the human mind.

Members of the symbolist circle of the Nabis professed a great interest in the life of the soul, or interior life. Certain Fin de Siècle paintings and woodcut prints of interiors by Vuillard and Vallotton, I argued, can be linked to this interest in the inner life of the self, and particularly, to the developing notion of a hidden unconscious.

Edgar Degas’s painting *Interior (The Rape)* marks a shift from the emphasis on moralizing tales in genre painting, or on “the habitual” in realist interiors, to an emphasis on the unusual, the excessive, hidden or perverted side of human psychology. This hidden, darker side of human psychology would be taken up in a late nineteenth century “unmasking” trend in psychology, prevalent from the 1880s onward, and developed notably in literature by Dostoevsky and later Ibsen. The project to unveil how man is a self-deceiving being, who is also constantly deceiving

his fellow-men, originates with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, in their idea that consciousness is based on lies.

The central theme of a series of woodcut prints by Félix Vallotton from 1898, entitled *Intimacies*, I argued, was precisely this unmasking of the hypocrisies of bourgeois social life at the turn of the nineteenth century, wherein the perversions of marital and amorous life were hidden away under conventional outer forms. With the project of unmasking the lies and superficialities of the bourgeois life and showing its inner perversity, Vallotton looked forward to the development of psychoanalysis. The project of reading symbols as masking hidden memories, motivations or trauma's, was the fundament of Freudian psychoanalysis. Institutionalized only after 1900, the psychoanalytic cure is based on the exposure of repressed drives, feelings, memories or longings. The scene where these repressions took place was the domestic interior, where bourgeois private life took place.

Edouard Vuillard's painting *Interior (Mystery)* of 1896-1897 can be connected to another late nineteenth-century interpretation of the unconscious, i.e. the unconscious as a "storage room" for collective human history. For many Symbolists, the access to a transcendent "*au-delà*", described among others as eternity, was to be found *inside* the self. Interestingly, the opening up to this mysterious *au-delà*, would simply take place in the everyday surroundings, that is, in the interior. What was needed however, was a specific state of soul, an indefinable *état d'âme*. The technique employed by the Symbolists to provide the right state of mind for such an opening of the psyche to a transcendent truth, was suggestion, borrowed from the practice of hypnosis. The task of art, in the words of Henri Bergson in 1889, was to put the active mind to sleep, and to bring the beholder in a state of perfect docility. In this lulled state, the idea suggested by the artist could be understood, and sympathy with the expressed feeling could be felt directly.

In my paper, I proposed an interpretation of Vuillard's mysterious and crepuscular painting exactly in the line of such reasoning, so as an agent or creator of a "docile" state of mind. This state would then allow the beholder to connect with his or her unconscious, where the traces of collective, eternal human sediment could be followed.

Discussion

Juliet Simpson: Very interested in the idea of *intimité* and the relationship between *intimité* and the developing bourgeois interior space. Have you had any thoughts about that idea and a possible Baudelairean connection? This idea of *intimité* came up as early as his 1846 *Salon*, when he described romanticism as "*intimité, spiritualité, couleur*". And is there a sense that this Baudelairean interest can be revisited in the context of newer psychological theories?

Merel Van Tilburg: Yes, absolutely. It was known that the Nabis were avid readers of Baudelaire and I am sure they read the *Salons*. There is already the idea of involuntary memory in Baudelaire, except that towards the end of the 19th century it becomes more complex and perverse and more attached to the discovery of the unconscious. With Baudelaire it is much more romantically contextualised.

Kathy Lochnan: Can you discuss further what was meant by the term *au-delà*?

Merel Van Tilburg: It is best translated as the beyond. I translated it as a transcendent realm. It is a keyword most used by Maurice Maeterlinck (and elsewhere in the circle of the Nabis). *Au-delà* became a sort of *portemanteau* for many ideas, a bringing together of everything that transcends; the platonic form, God, any kind of mystical experience with nature, etc. For Maeterlinck it is more precisely defined as a hidden place where dark forces are lurking and waiting (death).

Fred Leeman: *Au-delà* is also connected with spiritism.

Merel Van Tilburg: Yes, there is a real sense that the *au-delà*, the realm of the dead is actually tangible, that you can communicate with spirits, even see them and maybe touch them. Spirit photography was not uncommon, and of course Victor Hugo had made spiritist drawings.

Sylvie Patry: Do we know more about the Nabis's interest in and knowledge of this psychological context and research? And what is the relationship between the use of *intimisme* in France and the Nabis?

Merel Van Tilburg: There is a review of a Vuillard exhibition (1901) where the critic claims "Vuillard is not an intimist because he stays at the surface". If you read Vuillard's journals then you see that he does want to go beyond the surface and express feelings through form so in that sense he would be an intimist. I think the term itself is difficult as everyone uses it according to their own understanding; it has multiple definitions.

The interest in psychological research is a puzzling question. Some of the Nabis were interested in St Augustine and his theory of the inner self as an architectural building. They probably had more knowledge from occult practices.

Katherine Kuenzli: Looking at Vuillard's painting *Interior (Mystery)*, 1896-97, what is fascinating is how the boundary between the interior (room) and the exterior seems to dissolve at certain points. There appears to be a fluidity in the representation of space that may be more subtle and complex than this notion of refuge from a world that has become too public. Might the *Interior* at this point in the 1890s be more fluid and in a more complex relationship with the public exterior realm, physical and metaphysical?

Merel Van Tilburg: I think you are right. It is at the end of this refuge idea and opening up to the modern world, and if you want to be modern (which some of the Nabis did) you had to accept the claustrophobic society. How did this translate in a tangible way in their interiors?

Juliet Simpson: Another point about the psychological context is to what extent were the Nabis thinking about Hippolyte Taine? This also relates to the problems with the Benjaminian approach to this, that there is a very complex interplay between the idea of surface and surface dimension. Is there in fact a Tainian notion developed from *De l'intelligence* in terms of thinking of the self as very fragile, a play of states of consciousness coming into being with no fixed core. There are possible relationships around this idea of fragility of self and what is on display (through surface) and the idea of an emerging interior space.

Merel Van Tilburg: Jean-Paul Bouillon has written an article showing that Denis was a student of Hippolyte Taine, and given that Denis was a spokesman for the Nabis the rest of the group were informed of this model of intelligence proposed by Taine. They were much more positivist than symbolist in that sense

The art of Georges Lacombe: symbolist representation of scientific knowledge.

Gilles Genty

I. What is the Issue?

For a long time Georges Lacombe had been, in Art History, the heir of Paul Gauguin for sculpture, and in painting the adapter of the visual ideas of Japonism.

The recent re-discovery in private archives of many documents (230 drawings, 120 photographs, 150 handwritten papers, etc..) enrich most importantly the reading and understanding of his work, and expand considerably the interpretation we can make it.

In fact, his technical training, the visual sources of his works and his friendly network of contacts (artistic, literary, musical, scientific), all belong to a wide range of specialities, from ancient art to romanticism, from realism to symbolism, from tradition to extreme modernism.

In the past 12 months, the most important discovery I made during my research is that the different inspirations I mentioned previously, do not come successively in his work, but usually appear and interact at the same moment, even on the creation of a single piece.

The links (in a one piece) between the realist representation, the symbolist interpretation that the artist builds of the pattern and of the subject, as well as the use of scientific knowledge, are very representative of the complexity of the richness of the artistic production of this artist.

II. Richness of artistic and friendly acquaintances and friends

The subject concerning the G.L. acquaintances, being friends or artists are on its own, a comprehensive subject for an exhibition. The current researches and findings

highlight the key importance of his parents and his family. His mother was a talented artist, close to the School de Barbizon and J.F. Millet. His father was a journalist and writer. One of his grand-parents was a draughtsman. His mother managed an artistic and literary salon in Versailles, which was not only the elegant rendezvous of the high-class but also a special venue for intellectual exchange. There, we played music, among others with Schnecklud (also portrayed by Gauguin), we spoke about literature and medicine. Among his very close friends, Lacombe knew 3 physicians: Charles Sarrazin, Maurice Hepp and Lepold Chauveau. This latter, during his spare time was a draughtsman and a sculptor, and as matter of fact, his works are interestingly strange. In the Lacombe archives, we also find a lithography showing the menu of a meal for the Tenon Hospital.

Now the question that arises is : to what extent the friendly relations between G.L and the physicians around him, and, the contemporary scientific discoveries, influenced his creation and can be found in the iconography of his works ?

A. « Le Lavoir des Malheureux » (1893).

For example, the iconography of this piece has never been discovered. When working on the catalogue raisonné, Joelle Ansieau underlined several key issues and questionings: the sculpture would represent the washing place, located in the town of Ivry, one of Paris suburbs. As this information is very much possible (since at the time, many washing places could be found along the rivers), this does not explain the presence of many dead bodies floating on the surface.

Representing death and corpses in a state of decay, is in total contradiction with 2 ideas:

- The traditional iconography when representing washing places, indeed sometimes painful (Daumier) but very often bucolic (Paul Guigou).
- The action represented; the washing symbolizing indeed cleanness and the elimination of germs.

In fact, such way of representing a river, sweeping along, with dead bodies floating, is not really original at the time, and we find another example of such use of representation in the drawing by Steinlen 'Gil Blas'. This drawing illustrates a song:

Even today, the final meaning of this sculpture is neither clear nor confirmed. But of course, we could establish a direct connection between this image and the contemporary fear and danger of germs. We find numerous writings about it at the time:

For example, we can mention the song by the famous Aristide Bruant "here comes the Cholera": here comes the cholera, from one shore to the over, everybody will die "

These popular songs convey the numerous medical writings of the time. An example of it, are the writings of Pierre Mégnin who established in 1893 - in an illustrated book- the link between the decay of corpses and the appearance of a new fauna on the corpses. The aim was to find the hour of death to help the researches of Forensic Medicine.

However, in my own point of view, in the case of the artist G. Lacombe, all subjects linked to Death and its representation also originate in a key event in his life. Such hypothesis has been overlooked, but for me, it is of key importance: when the artist was 13, his brother Louis died of tuberculosis in 1881 (he was 18 years old).

B. « The Christ » from Brest Beaux Arts Museum

Although this piece is rarely in exhibitions (due to its large dimensions), often neglected because of its un-fashionable subject, nevertheless, it is with no doubt one of the greatest pieces of the artist. Until recently, 2 inspiring sources had been identified and questioned: the carved 'Christ' from Saint Salvi Church in Albi, and a self-portrait on a photographic support.

We know that the 'Christ' from Saint Salvi Church in Albi had been copied by G. Lacombe in a drawing () and in ()

The self-portrait of the artist crucified has been identified and published thanks to the photo prints kept in the family archives.

Quite recently, 2 elements have been rediscovered, and they throw a new light to the likely genesis of the sculpture.

First of all, a photography found in the family archives showing an Egyptian sculpture, which clothing corresponds fully to the Christ of Lacombe.

Secondly, a new light has been given by the rediscovery of new drawings of anatomy; in fact, several drawings of anatomy have been found 2 years ago.

At the moment of the discovery, I had logically classified them among the youth works of the artist, when he was experimenting on form and structures, which was coherent for a future sculptor.

These drawings of anatomy underline how the nabis artists kept on working such as did old masters. We shall remember the examinations and competitions that young artists of the XVII and XVIII century had to submit and pass.

The idea of split emerging from the discovery of the works of Gauguin – a famous issue from Art History of the 1960-1980, should be balanced with the idea of its links with ancient art.

It is precisely to this idea of links, that the last drawing found was important to us and the new light it brings to us; at the back of a sheet showing the anatomical study of a bust (), there was a second drawing clearly showing a study for a 3 dimensional form (), which leads us to link it directly to the carved Christ of the Musée de Brest, and it is striking. Therefore, we come to a first question that is the date to be given to the sheet compared to the sculpture? ; are they contemporary or did Lacombe go back to anatomical drawings?

This shows the complexity of the visual sources and the richness of his iconography: you will have also noticed that the Christ has the face of G. Lacombe, something that Gauguin did previously.

There is also another study, showing a snake coiling up the Christ, such as the caduceus of the pharmacist.

C. The tongue disease

Until recently, we only knew 2 drawings published in 1991. We knew that the artist had developed a tongue disease, and that a friend, a doctor, had treated him. The recent rediscovery of 17 new drawings has led to a more precise research on the subject. First, I shall underline the incredible staging that Lacombe offers of himself; close framing, focus on the tongue itself, high accuracy of the illustration of the spots and skin anomalies, etc

However, bear in mind that at that time, dermatological diseases were very much top news of the day, particularly at the St. Louis's Hospital. Alphonse Devergie built there the first wax museum. This new Museum was inaugurated on the 5th of August 1889, during the 1st International Dermatology Conference. This event gathered 200 physicians from 29 countries. Did Lacombe visit this museum, we do not know....However, what is certain is that a publication of the museum collection was published in 1895.

The representation of the anomalies (or holes) on the tongue of the artist, remind me of the craters of the moon. Unfortunately, we do not know if Lacombe visited the Museum of St. Louis hospital with one of his friends, a physician, nevertheless, it is quite possible that he might have seen the books of Camille Flammarion, by then widely distributed.

D. Very strange objects

We knew that one of the claims of the Nabis artists was to make and develop the production of artistic objects. In the footsteps of the Pre-Raphaelites, they wish to

abolish the dividing between the major and minor arts, between painting with easel and craftsmanship.

Such like his friends, Lacombe draws projects for pianos, chimneys, coat-holders (produced), trays (produced), etc...

The adornments he adds to his trays are actually quite interesting. One is a tray with the shape of a big flower (water lily), for which we have found the final work but also the preparatory study.

Lacombe has also produced another tray, unfortunately the location is now unknown, named “the tray of sperm”, the same sperm that we find in one of the preparatory drawings for the carved bed of the Musée d’Orsay.

Lacombe also made projects for frames; some of them are known and proved to be of a naturalistic aesthetic, where there is a mixing of anecdote and humour.

The recent rediscovery of a drawing for a frame, leads us towards new perspectives : a study for a frame () shows the mixing of inspiration, with crisscross of branches (entrelacs) typical of “art nouveau” and the image of veins or irrigation canals, as if we looked into a lung. Last but not least, the strange pattern in the corner is between arabesque and a grotesque mask, in line with the one he draws for the Drama Magazine.

III. Perspectives

Today, we did not have enough time (nor the ability, since all the elements rediscovered have not yet been analysed) to cover all the complexity of the iconography of the Lacombe’s works.

In the years to come, new discoveries concerning Lacombe work will emerge.

Discoveries and interpretation, or re-interpretations. We highlighted the direct link with contemporary scientific knowledge, and that is the first step in the update assessment and understanding of his work.

Lacombe is of course the nabis sculptor, the gifted student of Gauguin, the passionate collector of japonism (he owned numerous books of Japanese prints he bought at the Bon Marché store)

But he is a cultivated artist, whose visual culture draws from ancient art (Middle Ages and Renaissance) and the phantasmagorias of Romanticism. Flat tints, the various views confronting of sea landscapes, the attraction of the public towards the emptiness, has certainly much to do with the romantic landscapes, like the ones of Caspar David Friedrich.

Discussion

Why do you think Georges Lacombe is so little known? For many of us this is relatively unknown material. Is it because it is mostly kept in the family archive?

Gilles Genty: There are several reasons for this. Firstly, during the 1960-1980s, art history focused on the École de Pont-Aven, *japonisme* and Art nouveau and had little interest in Lacombe. Secondly, the family who owned the material did not want to show some of the material because they didn't believe it to be interesting (ex. the tongues) or because art historians had told them it wasn't interesting. Finally, in 1936 when the Lacombe family left the artist's house at Alençon, they destroyed a lot of material (manuscripts and drawings) and only what was then considered interesting was preserved.

Dennis Cate: Hasn't it been the case that as sculptors, Gauguin and Maillol been over-estimated and Lacombe underestimated?

Gilles Genty: Lacombe was fairly wealthy and did not need to produce artworks to survive. His artworks were for friends and family and he had little interest in exhibiting. The family saw and used his artwork as everyday household items (Laure Lacombe's tapestry was used as banqueting table cover up until 20 years ago).

Sylvie Patry: Can you tell us a little more about the upcoming exhibition (Lacombe at the Musée Maurice Denis)?

Gilles Genty: The exhibition will be about the discovery of all the Lacombe material and with the help of Frédéric Bigo will attempt to display as much as possible to enlarge the spectrum of discovered works before doing a more detailed scientific investigation. The range will cover Lacombe's entire life and will show the shift towards neo-impressionism during the latter stages of his life.

Will you publish?

Gilles Genty: The problem would be that publishing all the material I have now discovered would not be a scientific publication. We may attempt to find the best selection of letters and reproduce them. There is such a large range of material to look at that it would be ridiculous to try to publish it all in one go.

Juliet Simpson: To what extent do you see Lacombe's interest in disease and medical science as relating to any other broader interests of the Nabis (Bonnard and *La Petite qui tousse*)? And is there a political dimension to this?

Gilles Genty: In my interpretation of Bonnard's representations of bathrooms and children, these allowed him to express subliminally his personal issues; most importantly his wife's suffering from a pulmonary disease (which resulted in visits to baths and sanatoriums) and his lack of children. There are many representations of fecundity and maternity in Bonnard's images, especially during the Vernon period (c.1920). This is a controversial issue and there may be facts still unknown about this in the remaining Bernard archives.
There are possible relationships between the Nabis and an interest in disease and afflictions but I did not want to pursue that in this limited time for this paper.

Kathy Kuenzli: Do you have any thoughts about Lacombe's relationship with the Nabis group and Nabis sculpture and if his work sheds light on relationships and tensions within the group?

Gilles Genty: The great surprise is that in all of Lacombe's uncovered written work, there is little relating the other members of the group. When you see certain sculptures they have obvious connections to other members of the Nabis (*Aurore* = *Maillol*) When looking at writings there are many relations with Bojdar Karageorgevitch, with musical circles, with Georges Ancey, but very little if nothing on Denis, Gauguin and Vuillard. Perhaps this information is still to be found in a cupboard somewhere. This is still strange, however, as Lacombe drew many of the Nabis's portraits. Lacombe also left Paris in 1897 and never ventured back until 1916. This might also explain the lack of interchange.

Nabis or not Nabis: the Question of Henri Gabriel Ibels

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho

The Nabi artists that figure in Denis' painting *Hommage à Cézanne* (1900) often play the leading roles in secondary literature about the Nabis. However, the group was many times larger at its founding in 1888–89 and also many times more diverse.

In this talk, I focussed on one of the original "prophets", a man who has not been placed in the historical spotlight before: Henri-Gabriel Ibels. Art historians have never devoted much attention to Ibels. This persistent silence is not really all that difficult to explain, since Ibels is far and away the most problematic member of the Nabis. In this talk I first explained why that is.

In many ways it seems hardly surprising that many authors of secondary literature on the Nabis did not know what to say about this "odd man out". One could explain the complete neglect of Ibels by art historians by reference to the capacity of art history to rid itself of impurities. One could claim that Ibels simply does not deserve a prominent place in the canon of fin-de-siècle artists, and has no business at all in the overall narrative of the Nabis. In this talk, I suggested the contrary, however. If a Nabi artist does not fit into the group narrative, then art historians have an obligation to examine him more closely, and thus to reconsider the paradigms and definitions of the group as a whole. In short, one can look at Ibels as Popper's black swan among his white comrades, the Nabis.

I showed through many contemporary quotations and reviews that there is ample evidence to prove that Ibels played much more than a marginal role in the Nabis. He was part of the inner circle, especially in the group's early years. The presented material also made clear that Ibels did not at all present himself purely as a graphic artist, as he is often dismissively described in the secondary literature. Furthermore, his paintings and pastels were frequently and favourably reviewed by the critics of his day.

Then I looked at the difficult questions that arise once we accept that Ibels was in fact a full and active member of the Nabis: What commonalities account for his membership in the group? What did he share with the other Nabi artists? And how can we explain the enormous differences?

To answer these questions I pointed out that Ibels shared the common denominator that brought the Nabis together in their formative years, up to 1893: they were united by their aversion to the established movements of their time, academicism and naturalism, and they sought an alternative, encouraged by the achievements of the Neo-Impressionists before them. At the heart of all this, as George Mauner observed, were anti-materialism, naïveté, and above all, sincerity in pictorial expression.

Then I quoted Mellerio, who dealt quite directly with the apparent incompatibility of the work of perhaps the two most discordant members of the Nabis, namely Denis and Ibels in his treatise *Le mouvement idéaliste* (1896) Turning to Ibels's work from before 1895, we do in fact see some of the idealistic qualities Mellerio took from Aurier (the ideational, the symbolist, the synthetic, the subjective, and the decorative). Of course, Ibels differed in almost everything from most of his Nabi friends. But I stressed that their friendship and openness to new ideas gave the Nabis the self-confidence and mutual respect to accept that each one of them was different and that, as young as they were, each had his own individual path to follow.

Ibels's personal contribution to the Nabi melting pot of influences in those early years was his embrace of the tradition of caricature. As his title of "Nabi journalist" suggests, Ibels can be seen as a bridge-builder between the two worlds of high and low art.

Though the group began to dissolve in 1893, it was from 1896 onwards that Ibels's political activism distanced him further and more conclusively from his artistic friends among the Nabis. For the rest of his life, he would look back with regret on this parting of the ways.

While the other members developed into mature artists with individual styles and a firm mastery of technique, whose work was exhibited in the most forward-looking galleries, Ibels had degenerated into a mere *polemiste du crayon*, a polemicist of the pencil, as Zola had approvingly described him, thereby affectionately claiming him for the naturalist camp.

Discussion

Did Ibels's political interests cover the Dreyfus affair?

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho: Indeed it did, as he founded a magazine that was favourable to Dreyfus and went up against other printmakers who were not. More work needs to be done on this topic.

But the Dreyfus affair did not split the Nabis?

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho: In a sense it did (Katherine Kuenzli argues this) as Denis and others were more traditionalist and were against Dreyfus and the other Nabis were in favour.

Willem Russell: There was a close personal relationship between Ibels and Toulouse-Lautrec; was there any artistic influence between these two artists?

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho: Here is another subject that needs to be investigated. Ibels and Toulouse-Lautrec did make a print album together (*Café-Concert*) which highlights the similarities and the differences between the two artists. It is quite remarkable that there is little mention of Ibels in Lautrec's correspondence, but there were social and political differences.

Willem Russell: What was the role of his actor brother André Ibels?

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho: This is another topic that should be looked at more closely as André was a fervent writer and politically engaged.

Katherine Kuenzli: In a quote you gave it appears Ibels doubted his decisions. Have you found any evidence to the contrary, where he defends his choices and has more self-confidence?

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho: He had self-confidence in his images which take a very firm political stance and there are a few letters that reflect his commitment to his own beliefs. There are letters that hint towards frustration (perhaps even anger) at social developments (ex. Denis's medals). There is no evidence for any tensions within the Nabis group though.

Chris Stolwijk: Do you think there is still any primary archival source material to be found?

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho: I hope so, but there are so many archives. There are also family members remaining and they could also be approached.

Chris Stolwijk: Do you have any evidence for the reaction of the Nabis on Ibels's departure from the group?

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho: They may not have cared too much. There is correspondence between Denis and Ibels which shows regret on Ibels's part but we don't have any of Denis's replies, which would shed some light on this.

Fred Leeman: What is the relationship between Ibels and Vollard? Was Ibels a staple of Vollard?

Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho: What is remarkable is that Ibels is mentioned as being in the top three most important graphic artists but was not in many of Vollard's exhibitions.

Decorative Alchemy: Paul Ranson's Interior States

Elizabeth Mix

While not as well known as his Nabis counterparts Sérusier, Denis, Bonnard and Vuillard, Paul-Elie Ranson (b. 1861 Limoges d. 1909) made significant contributions to the organization. He provided a weekly meeting place (his studio at 25 Boulevard du Montparnasse, dubbed “The Temple”) and a muse (his wife France—the “Priestess” of the Temple). Ranson’s *oeuvre*, the product of multiple interdependent influences to be explored in this paper. Ranson had a deep appreciation for nature, before he had either formal training or exposure to symbolist ideas. Ranson’s grandfather, Jacques-Joseph Maquart, was a painter and engraver particularly known for trees that had a dynamism, even animism Paul Ranson’s early works show his attention to and interest in nature with only hints of the animism of his grandfather’s work—an impulse developed further once he synthesized it with ideas he gleaned in Paris through his association with the Nabis.

The name Nabis (from Hebrew *Nebim*, meaning prophets, but also Arabic for *messenger* of God), according to Maurice Denis, made the group “initiates,” a term that came from the theosophical bestseller, Édouard Schuré’s The Great Initiates: A Study of the Secret History of Religions (1888). Theosophy was neither a religion nor a philosophy, but rather a metaphysical blend of Western and Eastern religions combined with the latter nineteenth-century interests in alchemy and other occult practices. Ranson’s Nabi landscape (1890) and Christ and Buddha (1890), draw their subject matter from Schuré’s text. Both contain blue flowers – in the former they represent a cure for illness; in the latter they appear to be lotus blossoms to symbolize Egypt, but the flowers have additional significance – flowers like this are found in alchemical manuscripts; they also need to be interpreted with an understanding of a popular genre of flower literature known collectively as “the language of flowers” - floral glossaries or vocabularies that were believed to be derived from the Islamic *sélam* – a color and flower symbolism thought to be a remnant of the original language of revelation. Ranson’s work L’Aiguillon de la chair ou Kentron (1891) needs to be understood as referencing a tradition of popular culture representations of

women as sexualized flowers as well as an illustration of alchemical putrefaction symbolized the dragonfly (air and fire) and woman (earth and water).

Ranson's knowledge of alchemy came from a wide variety of esoteric texts that informed his work – alchemy is addressed in Jules Bois, Satanisme et la Magie and Les Petites Religions de Paris, and Papus's Traité élémentaire de science occulte (1889) all found in Ranson's personal effects after his death. Sources of alchemical imagery were also plentiful. In addition to the hundreds of original manuscripts (now conserved in the Bibliothèque Mazarin and what was the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal) popular books and journal articles addressed alchemical principles and symbols, usually in conjunction with other mystical manifestations. Ranson's La Sorcière dans son cercle (1892) and Alchemy of 1893 combines his grandfather's interest in animistic nature with what he gleaned from his readings.

Ranson's decorative work continues the blending of the occult and alchemy with popular culture references, albeit in a more subtle way. Ranson's 1894 wallpaper designs, Le Coq, Les Lapins and Les Canards represent a synthesis of Ranson's alchemical ideas with Japanese symbolism. The papers together suggest a cycle of fertility as well as a correspondence of alchemical elements. Ranson's water lily pattern, produced as both a wallpaper and printed textile in a collaborative environment for Siegfried Bing, was suggestive of the more theosophically significant lotus that contains three of the four alchemical elements (earth, air, water). Ranson's use of symbolic flower decoration on cigar boxes perhaps creates the ultimate fusion of male and female (and material and spiritual). In both examples representations of women are placed inside the cigar box (a feminine body replacing the "fire" and masculinity of the cigar). One of the boxes is adorned with thistles and depicts a clothed woman on land, in a vertical format to emphasize air; the other shows water lilies around a nude woman seated on the edge of a body of water in a horizontal format to suggest a closer correspondence to earth.

Ranson's decorative projects transform spaces, whether two- or three-dimensional using a decorative alchemy informed by his love of nature, his assimilation of trends popular in late-19th century *zeitgeist*: alternative spiritual practices, the language of flowers and the art of Japan.

Discussion

Caroline Boyle-Turner: Regarding the image of the three ducks, Mary Roberts took that theme and created wallpaper (printed in England) and installed it at Pont-Aven School of Contemporary Art, though she made the motif a little more contemporary.

Elizabeth Mix: Yes I was aware of that project but had to cut out mentioning it for lack of time. She made the ducks much more pink (they are very subtle in Ranson's version) and shows off the vibrating complementary colours.

Frances Fowle: Do we know in what context some of the earlier images were reproduced?

Gilles Genty: In the *Revue encyclopédique*.

Frances Fowle: There are close connections with developments in art in Scotland, for example connections between Ranson, Sérusier and Charles Mackie. Also perhaps between John Duncan's *Anima Celtica* (1895) and Ranson's *Alchemy*; so it appears they were looking at similar sources.

Richard Thomson: Was Ranson aware of Georges de Feure's work? You showed the image of the *sorcière* which is similar to de Feure.

Elizabeth Mix: At one point this presentation was going to include examples of De Feure from the *Courier Français* where the women's bodies are connected to the flowers in a similar way.

Richard Thomson: Did De Feure precede Ranson or did they did they come up with the same solutions at the same time?

Elizabeth Mix: I would need to see the résumés of both artists side-by-side to be sure but De Feure produced a lot of work for popular journals so it is more likely that Ranson was aware of De Feure.

Cindy Kang: You mentioned Ranson had a good sense of humour. But do you see any of that in his work and what he was doing with *Alchemy*?

Elizabeth Mix: I see layers of symbolism which makes it difficult. The alchemical references that I refer to are embedded in the esoteric texts that he was reading. *Alchemy* is mentioned as one among many subjects in Ranson's library and they were exposed to the darker sides of symbolism and alchemy. In Ranson's wallpapers there is also humour; he chose animals that the French eat regularly.

Gilles Genty: One of Ranson's favourite books in the family library seemed to be Gustave Doré's illustrated Bible.

Le regard de Félix Vallotton critique d'art sur ses contemporains dans les années 1890.

Katia Poletti

Félix Vallotton as an art critic and his view on his contemporaries in the 1890's

The book *Vallotton critique d'art*, to be published in early 2012, features 34 texts that were published between 1890 and 1921. They divide into two distinct periods, the first of which – and the most homogeneous – covers the period from 1890 to 1897, and belongs to art criticism as such. Today's few examples are drawn from that 23-article corpus, exclusively published in the *Gazette de Lausanne* and mainly dealing with group exhibitions in Paris.

As an art critic, Vallotton's view on his contemporaries may disconcert those who are familiar with the painter, engraver and draughtsman. We are inevitably tempted to read his words from the angle of his own artistic production, all periods combined, hoping to find the tastes likely to have influenced the paths upon which he embarked in his own work. However, I will stay away from that excessively restrictive approach – although understandable in the particular case of a critic who was also a painter – and will rather try to highlight a few significant remarks made by Vallotton in some of his columns about fellow artists and contemporary art trends.

One will search in vain for a clear sign in Vallotton's art criticism about the reasons why he was attracted by the Nabis. Indeed, he quite simply did not mention any artist from that group until 1907, when he only commented on Bonnard and Maillol. It must be noted that starting 1892, his reviews no longer included exhibitions that featured the Nabis, as they focused on the Champs-de-Mars and Champs-Élysées Salons.

The main interest in Vallotton's columns is to highlight the way he sees art and the artist. They reflect, for instance, his preferences in terms of moral values, where he advocated the liberalisation of institutions, proponents of outdated rules, and alienating creativity. As a consequence, he stigmatised any art form perceived as rearguard, while endorsing the painters who demonstrate independence, and whose

works he deemed original. Originality, honesty, awareness, sincerity, and boldness are qualities that he repeatedly attributed to the artists he praised. Consequently, he did not hesitate to go his own way at times, covering exhibitors who were neglected or laughed at by the critics. However, he sometimes lacked intuition, as with Van Gogh, whose exacerbated expressionism disconcerted him and made him overlook its potential, or as with the Nabis, whose novelty firstly eluded him. These rare flaws in his judgment are testimony to his difficulty in finding in his close, French or foreign, contemporaries the certainties he found in famous predecessors like Holbein, Rembrandt, Ingres or Puvis de Chavannes, and can be doubtlessly attributed to a lack of hindsight.

Discussion

Sylvie Patry: Est-ce que Vallotton a eu à coeur de défendre ou distinguer les autres artistes suisses quand ils exposaient à Paris?

Katia Poletti: Il ne veut pas faire preuve de nationalisme - au contraire - et évite aussi les artistes suisses, ou alors c'est pour les épinglez au même titre que les autres. Sauf en 1892 Salon de la Rose+Croix (où il a évoqué Hodler et Schwabe), où selon lui seulement les suisses et les belges représentent l'art de l'avant-garde (pas pour nationalisme).

Belinda Thomson: The hostility towards J.F. Willumsen is surprising: was there an aspect to Vallotton's writing that was looking for 'good copy'? Was he thinking of the journalistic side as much as his core beliefs? Perhaps there was something rather close to what he himself was doing that he saw in Willumsen, and was he slightly unnerved by this?

Katia Poletti: I am uncertain of what Vallotton was attempting when he wrote about Willumsen in 1891. I think he was quite disconcerted and Willumsen was surprised by Vallotton's woodcuts (letter from 1892; both were present at Salon des Indépendants)). Perhaps Vallotton didn't understand Willumsen's work at that time. Ironically, today we can see Vallotton's influence on Willumsen's.

Merel Van Tilburg: La remarque de Vallotton à propos de la naïveté et l'enfantin. Il me semble qu'il y a une ambiguïté dans le façon dont il utilise ce mot.

Katia Poletti : Le mot naïveté, le mot enfantin peuvent être connoté de façon très différent selon l'artiste auquel Vallotton accole cette étiquette. Je pense que dans le

cas du Douanier Rousseau, "l'enfantine naïveté" est connotée positivement. Dans le cas de Rochegrosse c'est terrible ce que Vallotton écrit sur plusieurs paragraphes.

Merel Van Tilburg : Est-ce que vous avez trouvé d'autres mentions de cette idée de naïveté pour Vallotton lui-même?

Katia Poletti : Je ne pense pas que c'était forcément une idée importante pour lui. Il y a très peu de commentaire de Vallotton sur ses oeuvres alors on ne peut pas faire un travail de comparaison de ce qu'il dit de son travail et ce qu'il dit des autres. En revanche, je pense que Vallotton utilisait des mots choisis très précisément. S'il n'y a pas de signe explicite d'un rapprochement avec les Nabis, on peut à travers le choix d'un certain vocabulaire voir que Vallotton tendait vers ce rapprochement.

Richard Thomson: You mentioned that Charles Maurin and Vallotton shared a sympathy with anarchism. Does that interest in the extreme left come out in Vallotton's art criticism?

Katia Poletti: Not in an explicit way but maybe in the way it condemns the Salons, especially the Salon des Artistes Français and the official artists. It is done in a subtle way.

Gilles Genty: Vallotton est mort en 1925. Est-ce qu'il a connu le début de la Neue Sachlichkeit en Allemagne?

Katia Poletti : Il ne le connaît pas. C'est déjà l'objet d'une recherche qui avait cherché par tous les moyens pour un signe, aussi bien de la part des artistes de la Neue Sachlichkeit qui se revendiqueraient de Vallotton et cela n'existe pas non plus.

The Nabis, Meier-Graefe and Narratives of Modern Art.

Katherine Kuenzli

Katherine Kuenzli's paper examined how and to what extent the Nabis' practice and theory of the decorative helped shape Meier-Graefe's aesthetic, which in turn framed the reception of Nabi painting in early twentieth-century Europe. She focused on Meier-Graefe's *A New Aesthetic*, which resulted from the critic's decade-long sojourn in Paris, in which he repeatedly and intensely engaged with Nabi art. In the first, most influential and innovative edition of *A New Aesthetic* published in 1904, Meier-Graefe presents Nabi painting as among the most advanced tendencies in modern art, and shows how it represents a decorative impulse that subsequently spread to sculpture, architecture, and the applied arts.

Meier-Graefe's account of Nabi painting was as influential as it was selective, privileging painting and favoring the work of individual members, especially Bonnard, Vuillard, and Denis, whose work he identifies as foundational to a modern aesthetic. Above all he privileges those artists who cultivated individual sensation, following the example set by the Impressionists. Art, as Meier-Graefe presents it, consists of two moments: observation followed by synthesis, in which the artist seeks to organize his sensations into unifying rhythms of line and color. The critics' emphasis on sensation and observation necessarily marginalized certain aspects of Nabi practice, including Filiger, Verkade and Sérusier's preoccupation with ideal, mathematical proportions and Ranson's occultist iconography. Additionally, Meier-Graefe's emphasis on form leads him to sideline the overtly political elements

evidenced in some of Vallotton's and Ibels's prints and posters, in which content takes precedence over abstract arrangement. Rejecting explicit narrative and descriptive elements, Meier-Graefe elevates abstract, musical principles of harmony and rhythm as the hallmarks of a modern aesthetic.

Reconstructing the critic's engagement with Nabi practice sheds new light on the construction of a modern aesthetic around 1900. First, Nabi painting helps resolve a problem that has plagued scholarship on Meier-Graefe. As Kenworth Moffett and Catherine Krahmer have noted, the critic in *A New Aesthetic* seems to vacillate between two different positions. On the one hand he formulates a modern painterly aesthetic based on the isolation and purification of the medium according to its purely material components, line, color, and surface. On the other hand, he traces the application of this aesthetic to all the visual media, including painting, the applied arts, and architecture. Moffett finds the two-sided nature of Meier-Graefe's argument to show signs of inconsistency and unresolve. By contrast my paper proposed that *A New Aesthetic* articulates a coherent formal language grounded in a selective and critical understanding of the Nabis' decorative practice. Second, rereading Meier-Graefe's text in light of Nabi painting also shows how and on what terms selected aspects of Nabi art informed advanced aesthetics around 1900. Given its heterogeneity, only certain elements of Nabi art mattered to twentieth-century practice. Reconstructing the Nabis' importance for Meier-Graefe thus offers a fuller picture of modern aesthetics, collecting, and criticism at the moment of their historic emergence.

Discussion

Edwin Becker: How would you describe the aesthetic of Meier-Graefe and is it visible in La Maison Moderne?

Katherine Kuenzli: As a gallery it opened in 1899. Meier-Graefe put into it many of the ideas visible at Bing's 1895 Salon de l'Art Nouveau. He imagined opening different galleries in different European cities (looking towards an aesthetic based on international expansion). Bing was more focused on French movements in the applied arts. He did however manage to display art from different nationalities of artists reflecting his aesthetic (the Nabis, English, Dutch and French applied arts). Simultaneously he also published his writings (*Contributions towards a new aesthetic*, 1899-1900). He was a very energetic character looking to put into practice his thoughts and beliefs, to find meaningful connections between modern aesthetics and a broader public.

Juliet Simpson: To what extent you see Meier-Graefe's work also engaged in another totalising project, not just the Nabis and the death of aesthetics but also to the critical project responding to Aurier or Denis? To what extent was he trying to shape the bigger picture?

Katherine Kuenzli: He is very aware of his critical method. There is a long passage about Georg Simmel (who he studied and respected) whom he thought went down the wrong path as an art critic because it is too abstract and theoretical. Meier-Graefe believed in a positivistic approach to criticism. He believed in viewing works of art and describing the visual experience, getting a sensual criticism. The 3rd volume of *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst* is purely reproductions of paintings. He knew all the paintings by Van Gogh and Denis and where they were kept. In my opinion, he wrote the best criticism of the 1890s.

Fred Leeman: You mentioned that the English edition (of the *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst*) was edited with many of the Nabis artists excluded. Was this because Nabis paintings were not readily available in England? How much were the elevated aesthetic principals of Meier-Graefe adapted to suit the market he would look to sell to? (As Paul Cassirer helped to do with the German market)

Katherine Kuenzli: Meier-Graefe was aware of the differences between the European publics and was fairly commercially adept. Catherine Kramer has started to look at differences between the French and German editions of *Dekorative Kunst*. In the English edition he doesn't eliminate the Nabis but reduces the sections about them, not an absolute rejection but an adjustment. Only a limited reception of Nabis paintings in England. He expands the book by including English paintings in the 1908 book which he had previously damned in the 1904 edition (hedging his bets).

Thank you to:

Attending delegates

Speakers

Van Gogh Museum; Axel Ruger, Chris Stolwijk and colleagues

ABN Amro

Isabelle Hegeman

Redefining European Symbolism c.1880-1910 website:

<http://sites.ace.ed.ac.uk/symbolism/>

Symbolism Researchers Database:

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